



Executive Summary

A Framework for Closing California's Academic Achievement Gap

Access to high-quality educational experiences is the right of every student and the responsibility of the state. Today, the State of California has not lived up to this commitment for all students, particularly poor, racial/ethnic minority students; English learners; and students with disabilities. This need not be.

For many years, there has been a cry for a public education system that gives *all* students a chance at a more hopeful and more desirable future than the present. This report is dedicated to ensuring that all students are able to learn to their highest potential and sets forth an initiative to close the achievement gap. The initiative directly focuses on California's students and their entitlement to an equitable and rigorous education no matter their ethnic, social, or economic background.

The report highlights the work completed to date by the California P–16 (Pre-kindergarten through Higher Education) Council convened by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell *"to develop, implement, and sustain a specific, ambitious plan that holds the State of California accountable for creating the conditions necessary for closing the achievement gap."* Development of the plan is appropriately the work of the Council because closing California's pernicious achievement gap will take the efforts of everyone—the prekindergarten community, the school community from kindergarten to grade twelve, higher education, business, government, and philanthropy—working together toward a shared goal.

That mission, at its core, is about *doing what is right, not what is easy*. And although the challenge of educating *all* students to high standards is daunting, the means for facing that challenge are within our reach ... if we have the will, if we maintain a firm resolve.

Why This Matters

Making schools work for all students, regardless of their background, condition, or circumstances, is an imperative for the State of California. The reasons are simple and straightforward. A strong education system ensures:

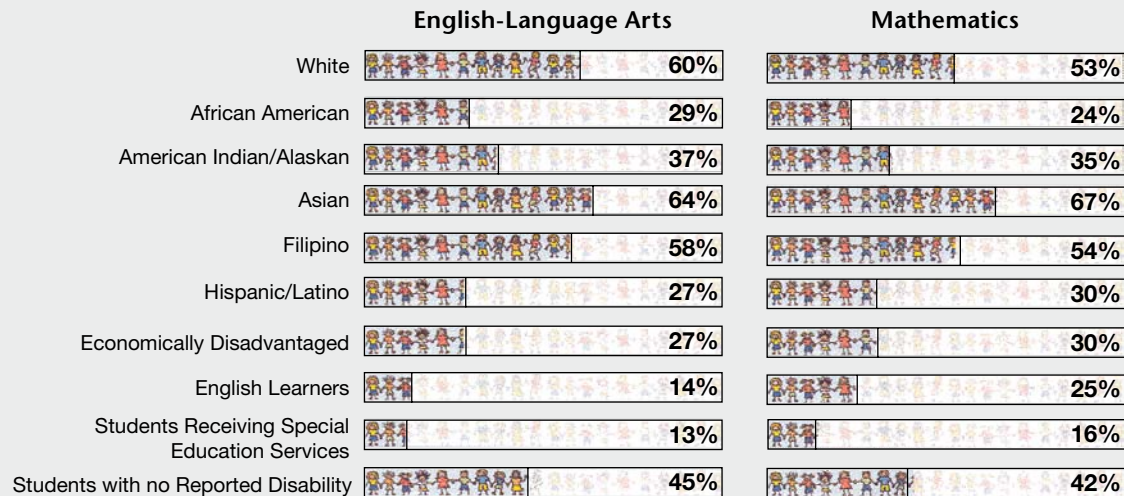
- Quality of life for Californians
- Economic growth and a competitive advantage for California
- Viability of a diverse, pluralistic, and democratic society to power California's prosperity

Each of these benefits depends on one condition: well-educated citizens. Strong public schools, where all students learn at high levels, remains society's best investment for producing well-educated citizens. California still has a long way to go in this regard.

Today, huge disparities in achievement exist among California's student subgroups. For instance:

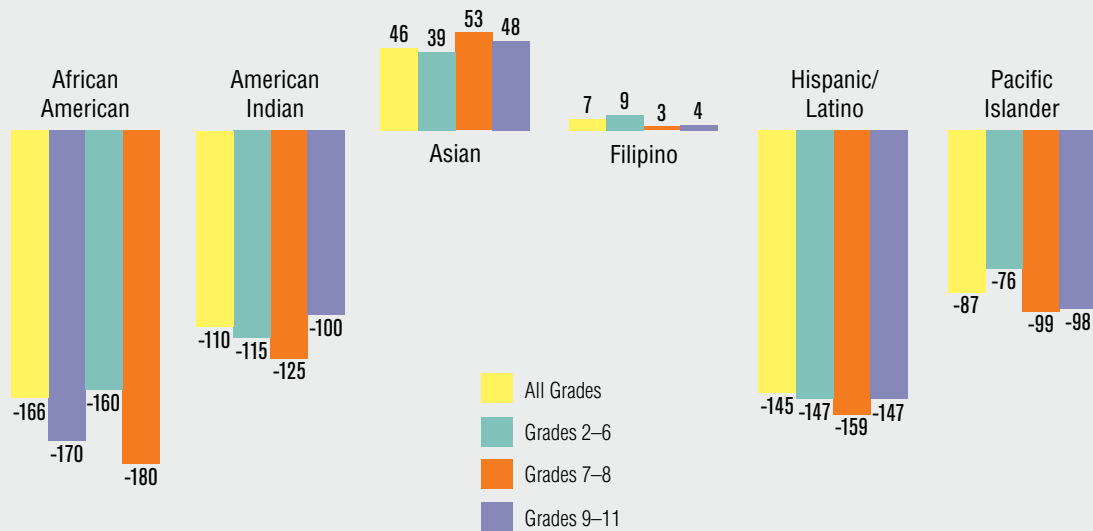
- About 12 of every 20 white students in grades two through eleven were proficient in English-language arts on the 2006 statewide test compared with fewer than 6 of every 20 African American students, Hispanic/Latino students, or economically disadvantaged students.
- Although nearly two-thirds of Asian students and more than half of white students were proficient in mathematics in 2006, only about 5 of every 20 African American students, 6 of every 20 Hispanic/Latino students, and about 3 of every 20 special education students met that performance standard (Figure 1).
- The 2006 Academic Performance Index (API) of African American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latino, and Pacific Islander students is significantly lower than the API for white and Asian students at every level: elementary, middle, and high school. Latino/Hispanic elementary students had an API 147 points *lower* than their white counterparts. At the middle school level, the API for African American students was 180 points *lower* than for white students. And at the high school level, American Indian and Pacific Islander students each had an API about 100 points *lower* than white students (Figure 2).

Figure 1
Achievement Gap among California's Student Subgroups:
Relative Proportions of Students Scoring Proficient
and Above on the California Standards Test



(Source: California 2006 Standardized Testing and Reporting [STAR] Program)

Figure 2
Academic Achievement Gap in California



| 2006 Base API | All Grades | Grades 2-6 | Grades 7-8 | Grades 9-11 |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| White (not of Hispanic origin) | 801 | 837 | 803 | 759 |

Base: 2006 Academic Performance Index (API) for White Students

Although California maintains some of the highest standards in the nation for what students are expected to know and be able to do, its schools are significantly underfunded. For instance, *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2008" reports the following statistics:

- Although California has the most challenging student population in the nation, per pupil spending is a full \$1,892 below the national average when adjusted for regional cost of living.
- California spends \$5,137 below New York and \$5,171 below New Jersey. A mere 3 percent of the state's students attend schools in districts where per pupil expenditures are at or above the national average, compared with 37 percent in Louisiana, 16 percent in Florida, and an extraordinary 95 percent in Maryland.

The state can no longer ignore the fact that major segments of the next generation continue to fall short of their potential. Quite simply, the achievement gap among student subgroups is a threat to their future and to the future economic health and security of California and of this nation. This need not be.

That is why the call to action by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell matters. It challenges and mobilizes California to live up to its obligation: **ensuring that every student is given an equal opportunity to live up to his or her potential.**

Underlying Causes and Proposed Solutions

The State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Council started with the premise that the major factors inhibiting successful learning for all students can be grouped into four main themes.

1. **Access**, or the extent to which all students have equitable access to basic conditions, such as qualified, effective teachers; rigorous, curriculum based on the state academic content standards; "safety nets" and accelerated interventions.
2. **Culture and Climate**, or the extent to which the learning environment is safe, promotes a sense of belonging, and fosters strong, positive relationships among students, among school staff and between the school and home/community.
3. **Expectations**, or the extent to which a *culture of excellence* exists for students and adults alike, so that a common, high standard is the norm for all students, and getting all of them to meet those high standards is a responsibility embraced by the school community.
4. **Strategies**, or the extent to which evidence-based or promising teaching, leadership, and organizational practices are employed by practitioners at all

levels in areas such as delivery of standards-aligned instructional programs, standards of professional practice, needs-based allocation of resources, collegial accountability and collaboration, articulation across grade spans, and leadership development.

Based on research conducted by the Council and other partners involved in this project, the following recommendations have been proposed to address the achievement gap among student subgroups.

ACCESS

Recommendation 1: Provide High-Quality Prekindergarten Programs

An educational head start in the early years yields huge payoffs in academic success in future years for all students, especially for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Educators continually comment that too many students enter kindergarten poorly prepared to start formal school.

Across many California communities, there is a lack of access to quality prekindergarten learning experiences for students from low-income communities, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and other underrepresented students. Building quality programs and then expanding access to those programs is critical to narrowing the achievement gap for all students.

Recommendation 2: Better Align Educational Systems from Prekindergarten to College

Graduation from high school ought to be viewed as preparation for success at the postsecondary level. Access to learning that is enriching and academically challenging is critical to all students, but it is particularly imperative for poor students and students of color. For large numbers of students, however, our kindergarten through grade twelve system does not provide adequate preparation for success at the next level; many of them require remediation prior to full entry into college-level course work or are underprepared to immediately enter the world of work. The misalignment of expectations for a high school graduate and the needs of the workforce and higher education institutions make the transition difficult for many students and nearly impossible for others. California can do better.

Closing the gap is going to take unprecedented collaboration between all segments of the business community, higher education and the K–12 system. The Council, therefore, recommends that the state align the K–12 system with higher education systems and the current needs of the workforce to promote better articulation amongst all stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: Develop Partnerships to Close the Achievement Gap

Connecting schools with educational organizations, city and county agencies, faith-based organizations, parent groups, and businesses is necessary to foster partnerships that will support a well-defined student support system. Such partnerships recognize that students have needs outside the classroom that, if unmet, can significantly and adversely affect their ability to learn. Breaking down barriers and creating partnerships throughout California is an important step toward implementing a consistent approach to a high-quality and inclusive educational program.

CULTURE AND CLIMATE

Recommendation 4: Provide Culturally Relevant Professional Development for All School Personnel



Learning occurs within the context of the values, beliefs, and rituals of the school community and the larger society. This is a necessary and potentially beneficial factor in creating strong schools—provided the school culture and climate reflect and are responsive to the diverse racial, cultural backgrounds, and needs of its student populations. This is not always the case; students of color often feel alienated from the norms and behaviors of the school culture or put off by educational practices that “do not reflect my background and where I come from.” To communicate and do an effective job of teaching, California’s educators need to have a cultural understanding of themselves, the students they teach, and the communities that house them.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a key step in addressing the lack of connection between scholars and educators. California needs to develop a comprehensive, culturally relevant and responsive strategy for educators that will help them to become the kind of educator who can teach any student effectively.

Recommendation 5: Conduct a Climate Survey

Data, when used wisely, inform continuous improvement of teaching, leadership, and organizational practices. A climate survey is a powerful tool for assessing the “organizational health” of a school and can be used to extend policies and practices that work for all students or to eliminate those that disaffect certain groups of students and parents. The survey will provide impartial judgments regarding

the quality of a school's climate and culture. Insights from the survey can be used to expand awareness and to initiate future actions.

Conducting a climate survey should not be a burden for schools and districts. An effort should be made to build on two complementary surveys currently in use: the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) for students and the California School Climate Survey (CSCS) for school staff. Both surveys may be used as a means of understanding the educational experience of underperforming students of color.

EXPECTATIONS

Recommendation 6: Augment Accountability System

Accountability and incentives motivate performance and strengthen a focus on positive results for students. California's current accountability system, the Academic Performance Index (API), is an outcome-based system that uses assessment results to measure the success of schools. The API, which includes annual schoolwide and subgroup growth targets, has focused attention on the needs of underperforming student populations. Now is the time to extend the measure to ensure the state is offering incentives and rewarding schools and districts for implementing strategies to close the achievement gap.

A key component of augmenting the accountability system would be the development of an Achievement Gap Intervention Index. Such an index, separate and distinct from the current API, would provide for recognition of schools and districts that are working to close the achievement gap. They may be using strategies such as the distribution of highly effective teachers, strong professional development, leadership enhancement, parental involvement, and community and business partnerships. The Achievement Gap Intervention Index would allow for a more immediate measure of progress made by schools and districts in educating all students to high standards.

Recommendation 7: Model Rigor

The expectations for student learning and achievement and the standards for rigor vary widely in spite of the statewide content standards for most academic subjects. Sometimes, the expectations are based on the student population or community demographics; at other times, inconsistencies in oversight at the local level or in resource allocation result in *de facto* inequities.

The state needs to define more clearly what constitutes a rigorous program for students. Specific suggestions include development of an online "anchor" bank to

serve as a resource for every educator in the state. This depository of standards-aligned assignments would provide examples of relevant curricular breadth and depth. It also would provide best practices and refer users to professional development opportunities on how to incorporate rigor into all curricular areas, including career technical education programs.

Recommendation 8: Focus on Academic Rigor

Many school districts have begun to increase the number of courses that meet the state's a–g requirements. Such courses help prepare students for successful entry into college. However, enrollment and completion rates in the a–g courses for underperforming student subgroups are significantly lower than the rates for their white and Asian counterparts. There are legitimate debates on whether a–g requirements, in particular, are appropriate only for college-bound students or whether they can equally serve those students who are taking career or technical classes. California needs a more consistent way of recognizing rigorous courses regardless of whether one uses the a–g framework or not.

California can improve these conditions by defining consistent and ubiquitous academic rigor to ensure that the state's high school graduates receive an education that prepares them for success at the next level, whether it is higher education or the workforce.

Recommendation 9: Improve the Awards System

California should align its recognition programs to address the focus on improving academic achievement for all students. Current recognition programs do not incorporate criteria on how schools and districts have performed in regard to closing the achievement gap. This practice leads to confusion in the school and in the community when schools are recognized for their “success” and then designated a “needs improvement” status for lack of academic progress.

STRATEGIES

Recommendation 10: Create a Robust Information System

If schools are to be responsive to the learning needs of every student, then an information system is needed that will enable educators and their partners to track the progress of each student.

California must design, develop, and implement a system that collects rich, robust, high-quality information that meets the needs of educators, districts, and state-level policymakers. Such a system will enhance efforts to create a culture

of data examination for the improvement of academic achievement. This type of system is vital in determining the services, programs, and interventions that students need. Specifically, California should supplement the existing CALPADS and CALTIDES data-collection systems.

Recommendation 11: Provide Professional Development on the Use of Data

Although the state collects a multitude of data reports, no purpose is served if those who need the information to develop appropriate instructional strategies are unprepared to use the data. Developing a robust information system, as noted in the previous recommendation, does not guarantee any measure of success without focused professional development.

California must design, develop, and implement coherent and relevant professional development in the areas of data collection, analysis, and interpretation for all educators that addresses the needs of students. The state must make significant investments in human capital and capacity-building at all levels of the educational system. The California Department of Education, in collaboration with higher education, the research community, and representative organizations, should develop a comprehensive training model, complete with themes, strands, and syllabi for local implementation.

Recommendation 12: Share Successful Practices

Educators need reliable and vetted resources proven to be effective with the students in their classrooms. Furthermore, these resources need to be readily available, understandable, and applicable to the classroom.

California must collect and disseminate a high-quality, comprehensive body of knowledge, expertise, resources, and research on effective and successful practices that are proven or are promising in closing the achievement gap. California must develop a system in which sound educational solutions to common issues can be shared by educators in a collaborative format. This system should not only share this knowledge with educators but should also model *how* to apply the expertise, resources, and research in their classrooms. California must create a well-articulated and coherent statewide information-sharing system to address the achievement gap.

Recommendation 13: Fully Implement the California K–12 High-Speed Network

California must fully fund the High-Speed Network (HSN) to ensure that every school, district, and county office of education has access to the level of technology necessary to assist students in academic need. The HSN, a state funded

program, provides Internet connectivity that gives educators, students, and staff access to a reliable high-speed network with high-quality online resources. Currently, 87 percent of school districts and 81 percent of all schools are connected to the HSN. Now is the time to connect the remaining schools and districts, particularly because a significant percentage of the not-yet-connected schools and districts are in Program Improvement. This goal of 100 percent connectivity can be accomplished through a fully funded HSN project.

Recommendation 14: Create Opportunities for School District Flexibility

Closing the achievement gap at the local level often requires creativity in developing the right mix of conditions and supports for students, teachers, and school administrators. A “one-size-fits-all” funding structure is not conducive to the needs of all schools and districts or to the goal of closing the achievement gap. California needs to provide flexibility in the use of education funds based on the academic improvement of students and the professional development of staff. Greater flexibility in the use of categorical funds, in particular, will substantially help with closing the achievement gap.

Closing the achievement gap will be a long-term effort by all involved. This report and its recommendations are only the beginning of that journey. The state must make a long-term commitment to achieve success in this endeavor. Clearly, there is no “silver bullet” that holds a single solution, and the proposed recommendations are just part of the overall solution. However, the work must begin now in order for that dream to become a reality.

This initiative, championed by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell, represents a new focus placed squarely on what the *state* can do better to close the gap. The California Department of Education cannot—and must not—do this alone. It must mobilize other state agencies, schools, districts, county offices of education, business, higher education institutions, parents, and communities **in creating the conditions necessary for success of these recommendations and, consequently, for closing the achievement gap.** All of California’s students deserve to graduate from high school ready for college, career, and life.

Noted philosopher Teilhard de Chardin once said that a most powerful force for moving a society forward as one is “a great hope held in common.” The hope that this initiative articulates—for students, for citizens, for the state—holds within it the potential to propel the State of California to heights never before attained.

Closing the achievement gap will not be easy, but doing so is critical for California’s future.